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ABSTRACT

This article provides an overview of the research in the area of black family studies which directly relates to sex role development. Weaknesses in the early black sex roles research are outlined, and insights from recent studies are cited. Several statements are made about sex role development in black families, as this has been described in the contemporary literature: (1) the attitudes of blacks toward the roles of husband, father, wife, and mother are unclear; however, the role of parent is a significant indicator of one's adulthood, masculinity, and femininity; (2) the concept of power and those indicators of this concept are defined differently in the black community; the variables used in white society cannot be used to measure power in black families; (3) there are available black male role models in the community; many of these men are integral, supportive members of families, yet not visible members of households, and, (4) socialization of black children into sexual and sex role behavior begins at an early age. There is some evidence which supports the notion that there is less differential treatment of male and female children among blacks. A list of research priorities is provided. (Author/JM)

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A CRITICAL OVERVIEW OF SEX ROLES RESEARCH ON BLACK FAMILIES

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Introduction

Most research on Black families done prior to 1965, which has related in some manner to the question of sex role development has been focused primarily upon the existence of a matriarchal family structure. Much of the emphasis by early scholars of the Black family upon the concept of the female-headed, father absent family system has been as a result of the popularity of a "social problems" approach to the investigation of the Black experience in America (Billingsley, 1970; Ryan, 1971; Staples, 1976). In an attempt to explain the inequities of the American social system, many social scientists have attributed many of the problems confronting

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Blacks to the female-headed household. Though the majority of Black families are intact (having both parents present), it is commonly yet erroneously assumed that most Black families are without the presence of adult Black males and fathers.

The notion of the Black matriarchy has been one of the most pervasive themes in Black family research, beginning with the publication of the sociological studies of DuBois (1909) and Frazier (1939). With the aid of census data, personal diaries, miscellaneous historical documents, and personal interviews, both DuBois and Frazier attempted to show that matriarchal family systems among Blacks were emerging as a result of adverse social, economic, and political conditions. Both of these scholars viewed female-headed households as a situational adaptation, which would disappear as Blacks moved into the "mainstream" of American society. Thus, the underlying assumptions of these early studies were that intact patriarchal family forms were inherently better and proper, and that the problems confronting Blacks would disappear as Black families approximated the idealized norm of the White middle class family.

Because many sociologists in the 1930's were concerned primarily with race relations theory, the Black family was not often studied as an entity in and of itself. It was not until some later sociologists and social psychologists begun to study the Black family that some consideration was given to the question of sex role development. According to one social psychologist (Pettigrew, 1964), who accepted the matriarchy thesis, the psychological development of the Black child (particularly the Black male)

was believed to be marred by the alleged "unnatural superior position" of the Black woman. Both Pettigrew (1964) and Moynihan (1965) attributed the occurrence of numerous social and psychological disorders such as juvenile delinquency, crimes aginst persons, schizophrenia, low intelligence quotients, cultural deprivation, and self-hatred to female-headed households.

Both D'Andrade (1962) and Lott and Lott (1963) in studies of Black youth contended that children reared in female-headed, father absent households developed inappropriate sex role definitions--Black males were labeled as being more effeminate than White males and Black females were labeled as being more masculine than White females. In general the picture of sex role development in Black families as painted by social psychologists and sociologists prior to 1965 has been one of frustration and confusion.

Criticisms of Early Sex Role Research by Contemporary Black Family Scholars

Several contemporary scholars have raised a series of serious questions about the reliablity and validity of earlier studies on the matriarchy and its alleged impact on sex role development. Such questions have been related to the following issues:

1. An obvious White middle class bias in the focus and theoretical framework of most studies on Black families. There has been a tendency among scholars to compare Black families to an idealized White middle class, patriarchal family form (Billingsley, 1970; Herzog, 1970; Staples, 1971). Black families have generally been labeled as deviant when the White middle class family is used as a norm. Recent scholars have begun to question whether the White middle ideal which is taught

in family life textbooks is representative of any American family form.

2. An overemphasis on the impact of family structures on sex role development, and an underemphasis upon the relationship of interpersonal dynamics upon sex role development. In other words, scholars have been overly concerned with the impact of a female-headed household and not concerned enough with the impact of interpersonal relations (both within and outside of the family setting) upon sex role definitions. Contemporary scholars have begun to question how the quality and/or quantity of adult role models in a family setting influence or relate to sex role development. No longer is it assumed that any father is better than no father.
3. A tendency among scholars to confuse the terms household and family. There is a distinct difference between a household and a family. The term household is defined as "... a cooperative group which maintains and participates in a given residential structure, even though the contribution of any one individual may be only part-time," whereas the concept of family is more appropriately defined in terms of kinship networks (Gonzalez, 1970, p.232)." The rather loose use of the term household to mean family confuses the fact that an individual may be absent from the household, but not necessarily the family. Thus, the household which is headed by a female may not be devoid of adult male models.
4. An overemphasis among scholars upon slavery as a significant factor in sex role development in contemporary Black family life. This

emphasis stands in contradiction to the basic principles of human social development. Black children have always learned sex roles rather than inherited them from the so-called "scar of slavery."

5. the use of culturally biased self-report instruments to obtain indicators of sex role attitudes and definitions from Black subjects. For example, many sociologists and psychologists have used the IQ scores of Black children from female-headed households as evidence that this type of family structure inhibits mental development (Sciara and Jantz, 1974). Several researchers have used measures of masculinity-femininity developed on White middle class subjects to investigate sex role attitudes in Black families. Such measures generally indicate that Black males and females are deviant in the area of sex roles when compared to Whites. Pettigrew (1964) administered the Minnesota Multiphasic Inventory (MMPI) to Black males, and he found that they responded affirmatively to statements such as "I would like to be a singer" and "I think that I feel more intensely than most people do." From these statements, Pettigrew concluded that Black males were more feminine than White males. Hare (1971) and Vontress (1971) have rejected this interpretation, contending that instruments of this nature are culture-bound and statements such as "I would like to be a singer" may have a different meaning in the Black community.

The use of the term matriarchy to describe what appears to be a female-headed household has created an array of problems for the scholar interested in sex role development among Blacks. In the technical sense the term matriarchy or matriarchal refers to " a form of family organization in which the mother is the formal head and dominant power in the family (Theodorson and Theodorson, 1969, p. 149)." The concept of matriarchy pertains to power, descent, and inheritance through the female line of a social system. Some scholars argued that a matriarchy has never existed (Goode, 1964). Black women do occupy a position in Black families and the Black community which is different from the position that White women hold; however, it is erroneous to assume that Black women have more power than Black men in an economic, social or political sense. Data on median annual income by race and sex indicate that Black women are at the bottom of the economic ladder (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1973). A cursory examination of the leadership positions with the Black community, as well as those leadership positions held by Blacks in predominantly White institutions does not support the concept of the Black matriarchy. For more discussion of the inapplicability of this term see Staples (1970) and Mack (1974).

New Perspectives on Sex Role Development in Black Families

As a result of the issues and problems in Black family studies previously outlined, a new perspective in Black family research emerged in the late 1960's. This perspective has been lead by a vanguard of young, Black sociologists and psychologists who have sought to accomplish at least three goals, these goals being:

1. the elimination of White middle class norms from research,

2. the incorporation of the concept of Black culture in studies of the family and the community, and
3. the exploration of uninvestigated areas of the Black family experience;e.g. sexuality, adolescence.

Several areas that pertain to sex role development among Blacks have been explored by contemporary scholars. These areas include:

1. the attitudes of Blacks toward the roles of husband, father, mother and wife,
2. the process of decision-making and the concept of power in Black dyadic relationships,
3. the role of the adult male who is not present in the household, yet a part of family relationships, and
4. the socialization of Black children into sex roles and sexual behavior.

Some of the most interesting data on attitudes of Blacks toward the roles of husband, father, wife, and mother have been collected by participant observers and ethnographers;e.g. Ladner (1971); Schulz (1969) and Hammond (1969). These studies seem to indicate that the roles of father and mother are extremely important indicators of how the individual and the community perceive one's masculinity or femininity. According to Ladner (1971) and Schulz (1969), the assumption of the role of parent is significantly related to the definition of one's manhood or womanhood--one is not a "real" man or woman until a child has been sired.

Several researchers have investigated attitudes toward sex roles among Black women via self-report instruments (Gump, 1975; Turner and Turner,

(1973), Black women rated men as more unreliable than other groups when when responding to questions such as "most men are like..." on a semantic differential scale. The response of White women to questions such as "most men are like..." was more positive and idealized than the responses of Black women. Turner and Turner (1973) concluded that these findings reflect the fact that Black women are socialized differently from White women.

Gump (1975) in a comparative study of Black and White womne's sex role attitudes found that Black women seemed to be more home-centered and submissive than White women who expressed more interest in their own personal development. These findings are contradictory to the popular image of strong, dominating, Black women. Because the subjects in Gump's study were selected from a college student population of Blacks and Whites, the generalizability of the results might be limited.

The popularity of the matriarchy thesis has resulted in the neglect of the concept of power in Black marital relationships by family scholars. Since it has been assumed that Black women hold the reigns of power, little research on the process of decision-making in the martial relationship as it relates to sex role definitions has been done. One of the most enlightening investigations of power in Black and White families has been done by Mack (1974), who used both self-report and a bargaining task to measure power. Mack found the variable of class to be more important in determining the relationships among power, gender, and race in marital dyads.

The studies done by Mack (1974), Schulz (1969), and Heiss (1975) support the notion that the indicators of status and power in the Black community

and in Black families are not synonymous with the concepts or meaning of status or power as they are defined in wider society. Education, occupation, income and sex are indicators of status and power among Whites, whereas these factors do not necessarily guarantee one status or power among Blacks (Heiss, 1975). Mack (1974) has contended that sex is a bargaining factor in Black dyadic relationships. According to Schulz (1969) and Ladner (1971) the role of parent affords one a degree of status in the Black community. In fact, the status of parent (that is motherhood or fatherhood) is generally regarded as an obvious indicator of one's masculinity or femininity.

Scott (1976) in an examination of consensus in financial priorities among Black and White college student couples found a sex role bias in the delegation of certain tasks. Black couples reported in greater percentages than Whites, that Black males made most of the decisions, wrote most of the checks, and paid most of the bills for the family unit. This study in addition to the work done by Heiss (1975) provided data which are contradictory to the stereotype of the powerful matriarch.

Several researchers have described the role of males who are not part of the household, yet members of the family (Liebow, 1966; Moore, 1969: Schulz, 1969). The existence of available male models in the community brings into the question the so-called effects of the female-headed household. Both Schulz (1969) and Moore (1969) have developed typologies which are useful in explicating the roles of adult, Black men, who may not be visible members of a household.

Sex role definitions are learned very early in one's life experiences. Thus, in order for one to understand a particular adult sex role (husband,

wife, mother, father), it is important that some consideration be given to its development over the lifespan. In recent years more attention has been directed to sex role socialization in children. Again, the ethnographic or participant observation studies done by Schulz (1969); Ladner (1971); and Hammond and Ladner (1969) have yielded some interesting data related to sexual socialization among Black children.

For some time, sexologists and other students of human behavior interested in sex viewed the child as an asexual being. According to this framework the individual's introduction to and participation in sexual behavior would be a rather abrupt and disjointed process. However, the works of Ladner (1971), Schulz (1969), and Hammond and Ladner (1969) have indicated that Black children play at sex and adult roles. In fact, these researchers have cited that precocity is encouraged, particularly among Black male children. Several sociolinquists have cited the importance of verbal skills or "playing the dozens" in the socialization process (Hannerz, 1970; Kochman, 1970, and Valentine, 1970). The aquisition of verbal skills in "playing the dozens" is part of a male virility cult--a process through which males learn and assert their masculinity and adulthood.

Though there has been a great deal of interest by psychologists in the relationship of differential or preferential treatment of White male and female infants to the development of adult sex roles (Maccoby, 1974), little data of this nature has been collected on Black infants. Young (1970) in a study of Black parental behavior and child rearing practices found highly individualized behaviors among mothers and other adults in the family. She observed a great deal of physical contact between parent and child; children

were also encouraged to be assertive, initiating and defiant within bounds. Young also contended that Black families handled sex role training and related experiences in ways which are compatible with the overall cultural handling of polarities. Sex differences do exist but are treated more as contrasts rather than as mutually exclusive traits. She concluded that sex role behaviors have not been rigidly defined in Black communities.

In summary, there are several statements that can be made about sex role development in Black families, as this process has been described in the contemporary literature:

1. The attitudes of Blacks toward the roles of husband, father, wife, and mother are unclear; however, the role of parent is a significant indicator of one's adulthood, masculinity, and femininity.
2. The concept of power and those indicators of this concept are defined differently in the Black community. The variables used in White society can not be used to measure power in Black families.
3. There are available Black male role models in the community. Many of these men are integral, supportive members of families, yet not visible members of households.
4. Socialization of Black children into sexual and sex role behavior begins at an early age. There is some evidence which supports the notion that there is less differential treatment of male and female children among Blacks.

Research Priorities for Contemporary Scholars of Black Family Life and Sex Role Development

As a result of the criticisms raised by recent scholars concerning Black family research prior to 1965, and the urgent need for more knowledge

pertaining to sex role development among Blacks a series of research priority areas have been developed. These priorities include a need for:

1. More exploration of the dynamics of Black culture and its relationship to and influence upon the process of human development. Explorations of this nature would result in the demystification of the idealized, White middle class norm. One scholar has begun to explore the relationship between Black culture and personality (Staples, 1976).
2. More investigation of sex role definitions outside of the family setting. Sex role bias and conflicts pervade all American institutions. It is time that scholars begun serious inquiry of the sexism which influences roles that women and men play in institutions other than the family;e.g. church, state, government.
3. More examination of the concept of power among Black dyads. Through studies of those indicators of power and status in the Black community, our understanding of the process through which individuals are socialized into leadership positions should be enhanced.
4. More exploration of sexuality and adolescence among Blacks. Given that fact that a significant portion of the Black population could be labeled as adolescent, more knowledge of the sexual experiences of the young adult would be helpful to family practice agents.
5. More inquiry of the father-daughter relationship among Blacks. For over fifty years, family studies scholars have had have an obssessive interest in the mother-son relationship. Perhaps, this interest

has been reflective of the concern (and sexist preference) of researchers in the personality development of males. It is certainly time that equal attention be devoted to the father-daughter relationship among Blacks.

6. More investigation of the influence of diverse roles or models that adult males and women have upon the process of sex role development. It would be helpful to obtain some knowledge of how the roles of boyfriend, supportive companion, or quasi-father as described by Schulz (1969) influence or relate to communicative patterns, power alliances, and sex role definitions in the family system.

7. More examination of the relationships among ordinal position, sex role attitudes, and personality development among Blacks. Though there is a wealth of literature pertaining to the concept of ordinality in White middle class families, there have been few inquiries in this area concerning Black families. One scholar (Hill, 1971) has already cited the role that older and first-born children play in the rearing of young siblings. He has labeled this phenomenon of role-sharing as a strength of Black family life. Though numerous ethnographers and participant observers have alluded to the relationship of ordinal position to power, sex role definitions, and personality development among Blacks, much is yet to be learned.

8. More study of the relationships among clothing patterns, sexuality, and sex role definitions. Though numerous scholars and persons in the

fashion industry have cited that many of the garments worn by Black men would be considered to be feminine by White men, no one has given serious attention to this phenomenon. Perhaps this cultural pattern reflects the fact that Black and White men view and choose to project their maleness or masculinity in different ways. The relationship between clothing patterns and the concepts of masculinity and femininity must be explored.

9. More investigation of the father-headed or female-absent household. On reading the literature one could easily conclude that father-headed households are non-existent. There is a definite need for more knowledge of the dynamics of this family form. One might wonder what impact the father-headed household has upon sex role development of Black children.

10. More observational studies of Black families where race, sex and class are at least considered as biasing variables. The proliferation and use of self-report instruments have added little to our understanding of human social behavior in general.

In conclusion, it must be noted that the ten aforementioned research priorities represent only a few of the more obvious unanswered questions in the area of sex role development among Blacks. Given the extent to which this area has been neglected, a vast fertile field awaits any interested scholar who dares to broach the subject.

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